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‘Farcical Politics: Fielding’s Public Emotion’

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In what was to be his last production before the 1737 Licensing Act put paid to his theatre career, Fielding’s gentleman audience-member, Sowrwit, observes: ‘the Morals of a People depend ... entirely on their publick Diversions.’¹ As with all of Fielding’s pronouncements, Sowrwit’s observation ought to be taken with several grains of salt and an eye to what John O’Brien calls Fielding’s ‘self-ironizing’² tendencies. Critics have rarely thought it wise to ignore the deep seriousness of Fielding’s political commitments, however, observing, like Thomas Lockwood, that his perpetual self-parody nonetheless reveals a genuine sense of moral and social obligation and, in the mid 1730s, a true moral outrage against the graft and abuses of the Walpole regime.³ In the last years of his theatre career, Fielding’s long-standing Scriblerian vilification of the tastes of the nation⁴ merged with a newly vigorous and partisan political satire. The early eighteenth century is a key moment in the development of modern political processes;

¹ *The Historical Register for the Year 1736*, in *Plays*, 3 vols, ed. Thomas Lockwood, *The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2011), Act I, scene i, Vol 3: p. 421. All following references to Fielding’s plays are to the Lockwood edition, and will be cited by act and scene, followed by volume and page number. For example, as above: (I.i, 3: p. 421).

² *Harlequin Britain: Pantomime and Entertainment, 1690-1760* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004), p. 194.

³ See, for example, Bertrand A. Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits: The Relation of Politics to Literature, 1722-1742* (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1976), esp. ch. 5: ‘The Prince and the Poets, 1734-1737,’ and Lockwood’s introduction to *The Historical Register* in the Wesleyan edition. But see also Robert D. Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre, 1728-1737* (Clarendon: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), for a reading of Fielding as principally economically, rather than politically driven, even after his return to The Little Theatre in the Haymarket in 1734.

⁴ Ashley Marshall, in *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658-1770* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013), argues against the idea that Fielding is a Scriblerian inheritor, claiming that his satire takes a categorically different approach to culture. Like Henry Power, I can’t agree that a different approach to satire invalidates Fielding’s repeated claims to the Scriblerian project. See Power, *Epic into Novel: Henry Fielding, Scriblerian Satire, and the Consumption of Classical Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 36-37.

party politics brought with it a new kind of political culture and a new brand of celebrity politician.

The enmeshing of celebrity culture and the British political scene in the 1730s oriented itself around Walpole, a figure Fielding targeted vigorously and repeatedly, if rather inconsistently.⁵ Fielding finds, in his *Historical Register of 1736*, the 1737 play that specifically targeted the Walpole administration, ‘a strict Resemblance between the States Political and Theatric’ (II.i, 3: p. 431). In bringing the figure of Walpole onstage, Fielding simultaneously acknowledges and creates his celebrity status. If, as Joseph Roach observes, ‘a good working definition of celebrity’ is that ‘images’ of the celebrity ‘circulate widely in the absence of their persons,’⁶ then Fielding’s presentation of Walpole’s image on stage in some sense invents celebrity politics. Celebrity is unthinkable outside the theatre in this moment – Restoration theatre is the venue in which private persons first become public, their images and narratives infinitely reproducible in ‘a media production’⁷ impossible before the rise of print culture. Fielding’s blatant parody of a single notorious politician forges a new type of link between theatre and politics in this new party political context. This is a kind of celebrity that only a new political system born in the aftermath of the Interregnum and in the crucible of a series of late seventeenth-century pamphlet wars could bring into being.

This essay treats the theoretical threads that shape the drama in the early eighteenth century, and allow Fielding so easily to draw these worlds together. Practically

⁵ He had dedicated his comedy, *The Modern Husband*, to Walpole in 1732, probably seeking a preferment he never got. For an extended analysis of Fielding’s political ‘tergiversation,’ see Goldgar, esp. pp. 100-102.

⁶ Roach, ‘Public Intimacy: The Prior History of ‘It’,’ in *Theatre and Celebrity in Britain, 1660-2000*, ed. Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), [pp.15-30], p. 16.

⁷ Mary Luckhurst and Jane Moody, ‘Introduction’ to *Theatre and Celebrity*, p. 3.

speaking, of course, the theatre had always been politically implicated. In the 1730s, the Restoration embrace of a court-oriented theatre with the overt patronage of Charles II had given way to theatre as a defining space for party-political expression among audiences as well as playwrights. Addison writes lightheartedly, for example, of ‘Party Patches’ in a *Spectator* essay in which women’s partisan political feelings are expressed by ‘patching’ on one side of the face or the other.⁸ But Otway’s *Venice Preserv’d* (1682), an early Tory play, galvanised serious political feeling among audiences in the aftermath of the Exclusion Crisis (1679-81), the political event that produced the earliest iteration of the Whig party.⁹ By the mid-1730s, when Fielding was writing the pointed political satires that were widely considered to have brought down the hammer of Walpole’s 1737 Licensing Act,¹⁰ theatre at the non-patent houses in London was a space of open rebellion.¹¹

Before the birth of modern party politics, of which Walpole is widely regarded as the midwife, political figures – from royalty to parliament-men; churchmen to state advisors to the king’s household – were ‘public men,’ in contrast to the generality of private persons.¹² Publicity was an identity rather than a practice, a life rather than a

⁸ Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 81, Saturday, June 2, 1711, in *The Spectator*, 5 vols, ed. Donald F. Bond (Clarendon: Oxford, 1965), I: p. 156.

⁹ See Jessica Munns, *Restoration Politics and Drama: The Plays of Thomas Otway, 1675-1683* (Newark, NJ: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1995).

¹⁰ This is a much-debated topic in Fielding studies. Robert Hume points out that a Licensing Act was being debated in parliament in 1735, long before Fielding’s partisan drama was in evidence, and that the immediate source of the complaint leading to the act was a farce called *The Golden Rump*, not Fielding’s plays at all (pp. 248-51). He does note that the farce could potentially have been a fabrication by Henry Giffard commissioned by Walpole to shock parliament into voting for the act, but nonetheless calls the idea that Fielding’s plays were the immediate rationale for the act ‘ridiculous’ (p. 249). Be this as it may, it is certainly the case that contemporary sources pointed to Fielding’s Little Theatre as the deciding factor.

¹¹ See Hume, *Fielding and the London Theatre*, 239-40. See also Goldgar’s account of the Prince of Wales’s applause at the ‘strong passages’ in Fielding’s *Eurydice Hiss’d* (1737) (p. 155).

¹² A political document of 1573, addressed to the young Elizabeth I, clarifies this distinction well. John Bridges, in response to a secretly printed pro-Catholic document claiming that kings are granted ‘*priuete*, but not ... *publique iudgement*,’ argues that a prince’s private judgement may legitimately be ‘set forth ...

sphere. Celebrity raises the questions of how ‘private’ persons become ‘public’ persons, whether it is possible to inhabit both identities, and what the relationship is between private acts and public life. Public identity obviated any kind of protected intimate space; where politics and the political person were inseparable, where kings embodied nations and politics was a birthright, removing any aspect of the public person from the sphere of politics was unthinkable.¹³ In some sense, then, there was never such a thing as a political actor who was *not* a celebrity, and yet, in many ways, Fielding’s insistence that Walpole is an actor in the sense of a theatrical performer, even an author of political farce instantiates the very idea of political celebrity as a form of political acting (in both senses) that is categorically distinct from the public lives of political actors before the rise of party politics. Common in the period was a nostalgic longing for a past moment in which the whole being of the politician, from his birth to his bedmates, seemed to belong incontrovertibly to the political realm. The immense popularity of Dryden’s *All for Love* (1678), for example, in which Antony’s domestic betrayal of Octavia and his passivity in the face of his passion for Cleopatra serve to code his political inefficacy, illustrates the power of a vision of the past in which private acts were indistinguishable from public politics. Addison’s *Cato* (1713), in a contrasting example of Roman virtue, imagines a Stoic ideal of patriotism in which the domestic family unit, as well as the ideal Roman man, embodies public politics rather than private emotion. In a famous example, Cato, upon seeing his son’s corpse, enjoins the mourners, ‘let not a private loss/ Afflict your

publiquely, by his princely authoritie.’ The fact of his or her identity as a Prince means that, although a prince cannot be called to spiritual ministry, ‘his *private Iudgement*, directs his *publique Iudgement*. For a Prince is not only a *private man*, but a *publique man* also ... he giueth a *publique Iudgement* in respect he is a *publique person*’ (The Supremacie of Christian Princes [London, 1573], pp. 877-78).

¹³ The ur-text for tracing this shift to the modern nation-state and its concomitant development of the ideas of public and private is Jürgen Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991).

hearts. ‘Tis Rome requires our tears.’¹⁴ Cato simultaneously relegates the feeling we have for family to the private sphere, and reorients the intensity of intimate emotion, creating an entirely public, political self defined by an affective connection to the nation.

But in Fielding’s moment, as in ours, the idea of celebrity requires privacy as one of its premises. That there is a separable private realm is inherent in the notion of a celebrity that violates it. Stella Tillyard thus writes that ‘[c]elebrity was born at the moment private life became a tradeable public commodity.’¹⁵ The concept of celebrity trades on the notion that private acts only become public as a result either of provocation (the actor’s of us) or violation (ours of the actor). Celebrity brings with it a series of new kinds of attachments to figures with whom we are not in fact connected, but it also seems inevitably to carry with it a kind of satiric violence. One way of naming this is what Joseph Roach calls ‘public intimacy.’¹⁶ What does it mean, then, when we feel profoundly about celebrity politicians? These feelings bridge the possibilities and potential of public and private, intimate and performative; they marry individual emotion and social affectivity.

In this essay, I want to try to understand the way Fielding links the unmooring of genre to the emotions we have, or ought to have, about politics. I also want to try to understand what this connection between the formal generic qualities of the drama and the affective context of eighteenth-century party politics can tell us about the intimate history of eighteenth-century emotion. Three of Fielding’s last productions of the 1730s, *Pasquin* (1736), *The Historical Register for 1736* (1737), and *Eurydice Hiss’d* (1737),

¹⁴ Addison, *Cato, A Tragedy*, ed. Christine Dunn Henderson and Mark E. Yellin (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), IV.iv, p. 84.

¹⁵ Tillyard, ‘Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century London,’ *History Today* 55.6 (2005): [20-27], p. 25.

¹⁶ See Roach, *It* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan P, 2007), p. 3.

bring his party political satire into crashing proximity to his discussion of genre, and, still more compellingly, to his propensity for self-parody. When Fielding stages politics, and particularly, when he stages Walpole's political celebrity, he tells us about the way in which a private person, in becoming a public figure, changes our feelings about our nation.

Richard Sennett, in *The Fall of Public Man* (1974), gives us a way to think through the history of political emotion. He writes that theatre makes sense of public life in the eighteenth century¹⁷; that the public man is an actor, and that his performances 'involv[e] him and others in a social bond' (p. 108); that emotion in this period is aroused by convention and expressed in artificial, conventional terms, and that these conventions do not imply a lack of reality or a failure of sincerity, on the contrary, the deeply conventional nature of theatrical performance is what makes it 'real': 'In such societies, "illusion" has no connotation of unreality' (p. 80), and 'spontaneity was a product of artificiality' (p. 86). He asks: 'Can it be that the freedom to feel is greater when one's personality and one's identity in society are quite clearly separated? Can spontaneity and what we have learned to call "artificiality" have some hidden and necessary relationship?' Last, in a formulation that's particularly apt for my purposes here, he argues that, before the nineteenth century, ' "pity" is not different' based on circumstances'; 'pity exists as an independent emotion rather than varying with ... each experience of it.' In contrast, in a modern context, 'the principle of representation of emotion is asocial, for in not having the same report of pity to make, people do not have a common sense of pity to share as a social bond' (p. 108). Sennett imagines the publicly shared, highly ritualized emotion of eighteenth-century people as a performance of social

¹⁷ Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 64.

bonds and intimate feeling as the glue of common interests. Sennett's historical accuracy is highly questionable, his decontextualised examples tend to provoke skepticism, and his sweeping statements about human emotional states make us nervous, but it seems to me that his aggressive unlinking of artifice and convention from insincerity has much to offer our understanding of the affective context of eighteenth-century life. The fact that he begins with the feelings we have about politics also seems particularly apt, given the sharp shift in British political self-conceptions after the Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights.¹⁸ His understanding allows us to grasp the highly conventional modes of the drama, in particular, as purveyors and conveyors of genuine emotion.

I want to examine the valences of eighteenth-century genre in light of Sennett's insistence that convention *can* give us access to, or even encode our deepest selves. In this I am departing somewhat from Lisa Freeman's brilliant study, *Character's Theatre* (2002). Freeman's work is grounded by her conviction that eighteenth-century theatre self-consciously offers an alternative to the increasingly powerful novelistic narrative of the self, which describes a deep psychology. She claims theatrical convention for the force of its emphasis on the performed and artificial nature of identity, thus qualifying the dominant narrative of eighteenth-century studies: that the rise of the novel pushed aside or limited the influence of other cultural forms. Theatre offers eighteenth-century audiences an alternative to novelistic character, giving them a characterology of shape-shifting, performance-driven roles. I think, however, that the way theatre insists on the interdependency of artifice and emotion, particularly the responsive emotion of audiences, suggests that theatrical artifice can act to model the passions that are then

¹⁸ See, for what is still a persuasive account of this shift, J.G.A. Pocock's *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), esp. ch. 2: 'Virtues, Rights, and Manners.'

conveyed to audiences and which, finally, serve to construct a notion of deep psychology as a psychology of reception, not of performance. Fielding – and Sennett – finds his new affective politics in the responsive emotion of audiences.

We see the link between drama and politics most commonly in the cultural sentiment about tragedy in this period. In the 1730s, tragedy has a specifically nationalist connotation. As Freeman observes, playwrights ‘explicitly invoked service to the state as the primary interest of tragedy’ (89). Discussions of the cathartic effects of tragedy consistently emerge in the context of civic duty. Pope’s famous preface to Addison’s *Cato* (1713), which calls upon a tearful audience to be moved to national sympathy, echoes and reechoes through the century as it seems to sum up and concretise the function both of tragedy in calling forth ‘[s]uch tears as patriots shed’ (ln. 14) and of the ideal function of sympathy more generally.¹⁹ Tragedy is the starting-place for any number of influential discussions of emotion in the eighteenth century, from Dennis and Addison through Burke, Hume and Smith. In the 1720s, when Francis Hutcheson divides our affections into what he calls the ‘selfish’ desires and the ‘*publick Sense*,’²⁰ he defines ‘*publick Affections*’ (57) almost entirely in reference to the representations in tragedy. We feel public affections, he says, in combination with our ‘*moral Perceptions* of the Virtue or Vice’ (57) of a character. If the true manifestation of ‘publick Affection’ is modeled by and modeled on tragedy, farcical politics means not simply a degenerate nation on a broad political level, but a profound degeneracy at the level of individual character and individual moral sense. For Fielding, theatre cannot be separated either from politics or

¹⁹ Adam Smith, for example, turns to the figure of Cato in developing his theory of the ‘impartial spectator’ in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759).

²⁰ Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, ed. Aaron Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), pp. 23-4.

from individual moral character. Fielding's farce makes the serious political case that farcical politics divide us from the 'publick Sense' that ought to define our immediate, unthinking, intimate, and affective connection to the nation.

Later in his career, Fielding would make his political concerns indistinguishable from his theories of genre and of psychology, writing, in an essay on humour, about the frightening ease of slipping from comic laughter to cruel torture. Fielding deliberately echoes Congreve on humour, but pushes beyond Congreve's formulation to develop a definition of 'another Kind of Humour.'²¹ This kind of humour is 'that tragical Humour ... which, tho' it may tend to raise Laughter in some, may however be said to have its Foundation in Tears' (p. 169). The tragedy, in a counterintuitive formulation, inheres in the object of ridicule or torture rather than in the humorist who inflicts it. Fielding explains that it is continuous with the 'practical Humour' of the practical joker: 'this tragical Humour consists in afflicting Men with the greatest and most serious Evils' (p. 169). The nadir of this slippery slope, he claims, are 'the Reigns of Caligula and Claudius, of Nero and Domitian, of Commodus, Caracalla, Heliogabalus, and all those Imperial Bucks or Bloods of Rome, [which were] but great tragical Farces in which one Half of Mankind was with much Humour put to Death and Tortures, for the Diversion of the other Half' (p. 170). Notably, this vertiginous slide from comedy to tragedy, from liberty to tyranny, is organised by emotion. Humour in this period orders the human psyche at the most fundamental level, particularly after Congreve's reformulation of it in his letter to Dennis. Stuart Tave remarks that, by the nineteenth century, humour had

²¹ Fielding, *Covent-Garden Journal* 19, Saturday, March 7, 1752, ed. Bertrand A. Goldgar, in *The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1988), p. 169.

taken on 'a cosmic significance.'²² Humour, in particular, codes English liberty, as Fielding himself observes: 'Characters of Humour do abound more in this our Island, than in any other Country; and this hath been commonly supposed to arise from the pure and perfect State of Liberty which we enjoy in a degree greatly superior to every foreign nation.'²³ The gist of the rest of this particular essay, *The Covent-Garden Journal* 55, is to attack this assumption, and to claim instead that good breeding and good nature consist in eradicating the unpleasant peculiarities of humour. Nonetheless, Fielding's use of the terminology of humour in the earlier essay, number 19, indexes his conception of politics and national organisation in general as a psychic formation. This is about comedy and tragedy, liberty and tyranny *as* psychological pleasure and pain.

Fielding's parodic farces persistently overturn and ironise tragedy, suggesting that Hutcheson's 'publick Sense,' or nationalistic affection, has been perverted by its farcical context. His reiterated comments upon literary genre and its degeneration, what Brean Hammond calls his anxiety about 'generic miscegenation,'²⁴ codes a radical shift in the key properties of human engagement in the political process in these early years of a new party political system. *Pasquin*, *The Historical Register*, and *Eurydice Hiss'd* are all rehearsal plays, a well-worn genre for Fielding at this point. *Pasquin* was immensely popular, running for 59 nights, nearly unbroken, in 1736 alone. *Pasquin*'s satire is notably less specific than that of his 1737 plays.²⁵ *The Historical Register*, which ran as an afterpiece to Lillo's tragedy, *Fatal Curiosity* (1737), was performed as a mainpiece

²² Tave, Stuart M. *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago P, 1960), p. 91.

²³ Fielding, *Covent-Garden Journal* 55, ed. Goldgar, p. 172.

²⁴ *Professional Imaginative Writing in England, 1670-1740* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 278.

²⁵ See Goldgar, who points out that a year elapsed between the writing of the two plays, in which time Frederick, the Prince of Wales, had broken openly and scandalously with the government and become the nominal head of the opposition (p. 154).

and printed along with the afterpiece, *Eurydice Hiss'd*, from April 1737 until the end of the run (Lockwood 3: p. 369). I want to begin by examining Fielding's juxtaposition of comedy and tragedy in *Pasquin*. This play illustrates the way in which eighteenth-century theories of genre allow Fielding so easily to understand genre and its unravellings as analogous both to national politics and to the eighteenth-century psyche.

Pasquin opens up these questions even in its initial exchange between Trapwit, the author of the comedy-within-a-comedy, and Fustian, the author of the corresponding tragedy, 'The Life and Death of Common-Sense.' Trapwit and Fustian debate the hierarchy of genres, Trapwit insisting that tragedy deserves due deference, and Fustian refusing the precedence because one his actors has been held up. The play speaks to and of a world in which the order of things is upended, and it represents this 'topsy turvy' (V.i, 3: p. 310) world by reversing the order of comedy and tragedy. As Jill Campbell argues, Fielding's implication of 'Petticoat Government' (I.ii, 3: p. 269) in the upending of both political and theatrical laws suggests the total overthrow of what he considers the natural order in the modern cultural context.²⁶

The play's confusion of genre codes the national and historical confusion it marks out. As Albert Rivero points out, the brevity of the two plays and the sloppiness of their rehearsals tells us about the degeneracy of both the political and theatrical worlds, but nonetheless presents a genuine representation of the 'quintessential' generic elements of comedy and tragedy.²⁷ *Pasquin* was performed initially with a small cast, which meant,

²⁶ Campbell, *Natural Masques: Gender and Identity in Fielding's Plays and Novels* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. P, 1995), pp. 20-21.

²⁷ Albert J. Rivero, *The Plays of Henry Fielding: A Critical Study of His Dramatic Career* (Charlottesville, VA: The Univ. Press of Virginia, 1989), pp. 130-31.

as the editors of the 1973 Iowa edition²⁸ point out, that the commonplace doubling of parts crossed genres in this particular play. Lord Place, before his role was taken notoriously by Charlotte Charke, was played by the same actor who played Law in the tragedy. As the actors who open the framing rehearsal-scene complain, one has ‘a long Part in both,’ the other ‘not seven Lengths put together.’ Fielding typically makes this the occasion for an off-colour joke: the ‘Woman Player’ thinks ‘it is very hard a Woman, of my Standing, should have a short Part put upon her’ (I.i, 3: p. 253). When Mrs. Mayor longs for women to have the political power to choose their government, her husband responds: ‘we should have a fine Set of Members then, indeed’ (II.i, 3: p. 268). Notwithstanding Fielding’s haymaking with talk of ‘parts’ and ‘Members,’ his serious point is that it is all too easy for tragedy and comedy, as well as theatre and politics, to be nearly indistinguishable, a point he makes repeatedly. In *Eurydice Hiss’d* (1737), Fielding calls up the memory of the great political pander, Cardinal Wolsey, and, assuming the easy slippage from one great political manipulator whose name begins with ‘W’ to another, observes that Wolsey (read Walpole) ‘Was but perhaps the Author of a Farce ... Some then play little Farces, and some great’ (3: p. 449). This connection between the authors of farces and of political performances – between Fielding and Walpole – clarifies Fielding’s stance on both politics and farce: they are both tragedy overturned, misread. As the writers of farces have taken the rules of literature and upended them, so the current operators of the party political system have taken state functions and upended them.

²⁸ *Pasquin*, ed. O.M. Brack Jr., William Kupersmith, and Curt A. Zimansky (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1973).

Most often, Fielding complains that modern tragedy has degenerated to farce – ‘to provoke the Mirth and Laughter of the Spectators, to join the Sock to the Buskin, is a Praise only due to Modern Tragedy’²⁹ – but in *Pasquin*, he implicates the London theatre business generally, comparing its nonsensical processes to tragedy. He has Fustian describe in grim and cynical detail what it took to have a play performed successfully in early eighteenth-century London, a tale that ends, Fustian observes bitterly, with abuse and abandonment of the author, the damnation of the play, and finally, he says, ‘the Author goes to the Devil, so ends the Farce.’ Sneerwell, the critic, in an oddly sincere moment, responds: ‘The Tragedy rather, I think’ (IV.i, 3: p. 290). Sneerwell finds the author’s destruction tragical, but he also implicates the various complications of writers’ block, money-grubbing playhouse managers, temperamental actors and antagonistic audiences in the destruction of culture that Fielding considers the real tragedy. Ultimately, Sneerwell’s point is that it is possible for comedy to describe genuine tragedy, even to absorb its content. Even as Fielding turns tragic conventions upside down, he insists that comedy and tragedy can do the same work. Sneerwell, the audience stand-in here, is affected by tragedy and its corresponding emotion – pity – even in the moment that he hears a farce. In fact, it is his pity for the author’s situation that prompts him to call this narrative a tragedy. In one of his later essays on humour, *Covent-Garden Journal* 55, Fielding notes, falling in with Jonson, that humour is simply the excessive expression of a ‘Disposition of the Mind’ (p. 300). ‘By the Manner of exerting itself,’ Fielding continues, ‘a Humour becomes ridiculous. By this Means chiefly the Tragic Humour differs from the Comic; it is the same Ambition which raises our Horror in Macbeth, and our Laughter at the drunken Sailors in the Tempest’ (p. 300). In other

²⁹ Fielding, preface to *Tom Thumb*, 1: p. 380.

words, it is emotional context, not emotional content, that matters. The context of the given action and crucially, of its reception, is essential to defining its meaning as tragic or comic: ‘No Passion or Humour of the Mind is absolutely either Tragic or Comic in itself’ (p. 301). What Fielding is really doing here is first, entangling the definitions of genre so closely with the definitions of emotion that they are indistinguishable, and second, allowing the feeling of the audience to determine the meaning of the action. I want to clarify that this is not a self-conscious, distant, critical audience he’s thinking of, but rather a feeling audience. This is meaning defined by instantaneous emotional reaction.

That comedy could be curative is a conviction he held with increasing sincerity as his career continued.³⁰ He drives this point home in his dedication to *Don Quixote in England* (1734). The play, which inaugurated Fielding’s return to the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, was dedicated to Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth Earl of Chesterfield, a dedication that aligned Fielding indelibly with the political opposition.³¹ Chesterfield was vocal in his opposition both to Walpole’s deeply unpopular Excise Bill in 1733, and to the 1737 Licensing Act, though his eloquence was in the latter case in vain. Fielding aligns the ‘Freedom of the Stage’ with ‘the Cause of Liberty’ (by which he means resistance to the Excise), and in a seemingly sincere claim for the capacity of the stage to influence public opinion, he argues that ‘a lively Representation of the Calamities

³⁰ Stuart Tave’s discussion of Fielding’s prologue to *Joseph Andrews*, though possibly too optimistic about English culture generally, is an important statement of this argument. Simon Dickie is skeptical of Fielding’s claims to virtue in the prologue, accusing Fielding of reveling in the humour he claims to reject. Even Dickie agrees, however, that Fielding became increasingly convinced of the need for good-natured humour. See Tave, *Amiable Humorist*, and Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2011).

³¹ Robert Hume insists that this dedication ‘need have no special political significance’ (p. 184), and that ‘*Don Quixote in England* is simply not a party play’ (p. 183). Like Goldgar, I agree with the latter statement, but I cannot see the rationale for the former. The poem Hume uses to argue his point, ascribed to an anonymous admirer of Fielding, suggests that Walpole ‘Protect [Fielding’s] Labours, and prescribe the Theme’ of Fielding’s future writings. This strikes me as rather qualified praise of Walpole, and even potentially in the vein of Trapwit’s threat in the dedication to his comedy in *Pasquin*: ‘if they won’t pay me for opening my Mouth, I’ll make them pay me for shutting it’ (III.i, 3: p. 287).

brought on a Country by general Corruption, might have a very sensible and useful Effect on the Spectators' (3: p. 21). He points specifically to comedy, insisting on the 'Force of Theatrical Ridicule' (3: p. 22). And in *Pasquin*, his Queen Common-Sense pays tribute to Shaftesbury's *Sensus Communis* (1711), an essay that argues for the true ethical and philosophical purpose of ridicule.³² The question, then, is how, for Fielding, can this ridicule do its work effectively when its fire is so widely dispersed, and especially since Fielding's particular brand of ridicule turns back on itself in perpetual self-parody, suggesting that no literary form can 'work' in this degenerate social context in which only farce makes it onto the theatrical and political stages. The abject form of farce is the limit-case of theatre's social influence. In some places, Fielding insists on the importance of farce, on its reforming potential – farce, he says in his prologue to *The Lottery* (1732), 'still claims a magnifying Right,/ To raise the Object larger to the Sight,' thereby displaying follies that would be 'scarce perceptible' in the 'just Glass' of comedy³³ – in others, he cites it as the fulfillment of cultural and political degeneration, not coincidentally implicating himself and his own theatrical productions in this spiralling self-consciousness.

In 1737, Fielding conflates his own authorial avatar and the figure of Walpole in a single satirical object, Pillage, of *Eurydice Hiss'd* (1737).³⁴ In folding in upon itself in this way, Fielding's satire projects his personality onstage and directly into the political world. Even for an author who was notable for his capacity for self-parody – Lockwood recounts a tale of Fielding arriving to the rehearsal of a play designed to ridicule him

³² Fielding admired Shaftesbury and knew this particular essay well. Later, in *his preface to The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, he quotes Shaftesbury on ridicule and the inhumanity of children (ed.

³³ Fielding, Prologue to *The Lottery* (1732) in *Plays*, ed. Lockwood, 3: p. 149.

³⁴ For a detailed summary of how the satire operates to draw the figures of Walpole and Fielding together, see Hume, *Fielding and the London Theatre*, pp. 237-8.

dressed in the costume of his own parodic representation³⁵ - Fielding's conflation of his own character with his avowed political enemy is a peculiar move that has exercised critics. Fielding's author-characters are notoriously fungible, but Pillage in *Eurydice Hiss'd* is remarkable for his enactment of an extreme self-consciousness. This bizarre and unprecedented folding of Fielding's satire in upon itself tells us something essential about the way in which self-display, celebrity, and intimate self-critique work in this new political environment.

O'Brien argues that Fielding's perpetually 'self-ironising' (p. 194) stance insists that the audience take a critical distance from stage and page, 'render[ing] our absorption in the spectacle impossible,' and forcing us 'to adopt a critical relation to the performance' (p. 199). O'Brien's reading of Fielding's self-consciousness is the standard reading. Paul Hunter's rationale for Fielding's fascination with the form of the rehearsal-play reads similarly:

Fielding emphasizes the radical factitiousness of the form, its tendency to isolate, and compare, the fictional and the 'real' worlds. Traffic between these worlds – when actors fail to appear for assigned parts or when the play-audience at the rehearsal intrudes upon the dramatic action - underscores the separation and enables a concentration upon responses to art which may parallel responses to actions and events, especially political ones, in real life.³⁶

Joining the chorus, Rivero writes, '[a]ny play that seeks to heighten the perceptions of its audience, that challenges its viewers to read the world with histrionic detachment, makes

³⁵ See Lockwood, *Plays*, vol 3, pp. 221-2, for an account. Fielding attended rehearsals of Benjamin and John Hoadley's play, *The Contrast* (1731).

³⁶ *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975), p. 50.

an emphatic political statement' (p. 133). Though Lisa Freeman disagrees, arguing that Fielding's rehearsal plays interrupt '[t]he very distinction we think can be made between real and merely fictional experience' (p. 64), in the end she comes to a similar conclusion about the function of Fielding's reflexivity: he shows us that 'meaning is no more or less than a product of a particular epistemological framework that can be displaced or overruled,' and the subject of his drama is 'the full disclosure' of theatrical and social 'contrivances' (p. 65). This makes sense. Our post-Marxist desire to celebrate political engagement as a critical process, and art as a method of alienating us from itself in order that we might recognise our own myriad alienations makes excellent sense of our desire to seize upon Fielding as a principal celebrant of both artistic self-consciousness and political engagement, an author, indeed, who shows us how the two go hand-in-hand, how political radicalism and artistic self-reflexivity are as interdependent as a horse and carriage.

There is good reason to suppose that Fielding belongs to this camp. In *Pasquin*, Queen Common-Sense asks Queen Ignorance to explain the cause of her subjects' discontent. She answers: 'They say you do impose a Tax of Thought Upon their Minds, which they're too weak to bear.' Queen Common-Sense, shocked, asks: 'Would'st thou then from Thinking then absolve Mankind?' (V.i, 3: p. 306). The clear implication is that 'common sense' requires thought, critical distance, critical assessment while Queen Ignorance stands for the escapism of pure entertainment. To prove his point about the contrast between thoughtful drama and pure entertainment, Fustian contrasts mainpiece plays by the acknowledged greats – '*Shakespear, Johnson, Vanbrugh, and others*' (V.i, 3: p. 308) – with the '*Pantomime*' entertainments that frequently followed them. In his

epilogue, he again contrasts the mainpiece with its paratextual commentary: ‘The Play once done, the Epilogue, by Rule,/ Should come and turn it all to Ridicule’ (ln. 1-2, 3: p. 314).³⁷ Fustian wonders ‘how it was possible for any Creature of Human Understanding, after having been diverted for three hours with the Productions of a great Genius, to sit for three more, and see a Set of People running about the Stage after one another ... playing several Juggling Tricks’ (V.i, 3: p. 308). Fustian is hardly a reliable source – Sneerwell observes that those who complain of farce never seem to miss one – but his complaint was not uncommon in the period. Dennis commented on the frustrations of having one’s emotions wrenched from tears to laughter both by paratextual commentary and by the interleaving of comic scenes in tragedies.³⁸ Fielding is probably making fun of Dennis, but Fustian’s assessment nonetheless calls attention to a serious critical issue in the period: how consistent should the audience’s emotions be? Is it problematic to refuse the audience the opportunity to lose themselves in the theatrical world? To allow themselves to be caught up, to feel pity and terror and thus to fulfill the function of tragedy? At the end of his career, Fielding credits ‘the original poets’ – the ancients – with the capacity to create perfect illusion. They ‘are not indeed so properly said to turn reality into fiction, as fiction into reality. ... their portraits are so just, and their landscapes so beautiful, that we acknowledge the strokes of nature in both, without enquiring whether nature herself, or her journeyman the poet, formed the first pattern of

³⁷ For a reading of epilogues as vehicles of theatrical self-consciousness, see Diana Solomon, *Prologues and Epilogues of Restoration Theater: Gender and Comedy, Performance and Print* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013), esp. Ch. 5

³⁸ See John Dennis’s complaint, in his 1693 essay, ‘The Impartial Critick,’ in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, 2 vols, ed. Edward Niles Hooker (Baltimore: JHUP, 1939), p. 33. See also Tave, *Amiable Humorist*, pp. 181-87.

the piece.’³⁹ This suggests that Fielding’s ideal was not a perpetually self-conscious audience unable to immerse themselves. Of course, literary ideals and literary productions rarely cross paths in Fielding’s world.

Nonetheless, I want to intervene in the assumption that radicalism and the critical disengagement of the audience is an indissoluble marriage, as well as the assumption that artifice always alienates, rather than absorbing its audience. I think that, in this period, in contrast to our assumptions about the Brechtian connection between self-reflexive and radical art, radicalism in fact very frequently inhered in aesthetic experiences that encouraged their audiences to prostrate themselves before an overwhelming artistic and emotional deluge. Moral sense theory posits a near-total automation of human ethics. As Francis Hutcheson put it, a sense is ‘*every Determination of our Minds to receive Ideas independently on our Will*’ (p. 17), and encompasses moral judgements that seem instantaneous. Our desire to highlight Fielding’s particular and original genius, rather than his sometimes distastefully conventional morality, has encouraged us to skirt the moments when he suggests that there is an automatic element to the emotional transformation wrought by his comedy. This makes some deep sense of Fielding’s admiration for and patronage of Lillo, whose bourgeois sentiments and frankly appalling prose, one might think, would be deeply off-putting to the self-styled inheritor of the Scriblerian project.

Medley, the author-figure of Fielding’s *Historical Register* (1737), tells his rehearsal audience that he hopes to ‘expose the reigning Follies in such a manner, that Men shall laugh themselves out of them before they feel that they are touch’d’ (3: p.

³⁹ Preface to *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, ed. Martin C. Battestin, *The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding* (Oxford: Clarendon, p. 154)

416). In other words, Medley wants to correct his audience's morals without allowing them time to reflect. This is an ingenious way of getting around an old and difficult problem of satire. As Swift put it, we tend to see everyone's face but our own in its unflattering mirror.⁴⁰ Fielding's comparison in the 'Dedication to the Publick' that introduces *The Historical Register* is just as apt: he tells the story of a short-sighted man whose friend tells him that his picture is being used as a tavern sign. The man, furious, berates the tavern-keeper, who assures him that he's been misinformed. The sign, as it turns out, is a picture of an ass. Beware, Fielding observes, that the satirist's ridicule is inaccurate. The short-sighted man could not know that his friend was deceiving him, but he could have met the imagined insult with good humour. Fielding's formulation suggests the possibility of unwitting reform, of purging the audience of vice before they're 'touch'd,' before they're aware that the satire points to them, or before they fulfill the predictions of the satirist. This also makes sense of Fielding's reference to Swift's analogy between satire and the Trojan Horse in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726): satire should invade us, enter into us, before we can even be aware of its insidious (and often violent) efforts at reform.⁴¹ The automatic nature of this satiric cure is counterintuitive in our current terms: we must have self-awareness and self-critique before we can have reform. For Fielding and for a number of his contemporaries, however, the kind of automatic mentation that seems to be involved here bespeaks key elements in the moral development of human beings.

⁴⁰ *The Battle of the Books*, in *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. Angus Ross and David Woolley (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 104.

⁴¹ Fielding observes, in his preface to *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (1755), that his goals are more modest than those who wish to 'reform ... a whole people, by making use of a vehicular story, to wheel in among them worse manners than their own' (p. 145). This passage was read by Richardson and his supporters as a reference to himself, but I read it as a reference to the complaint of that other famous traveller, Gulliver, upon realising that the Trojan horse of his *Travels* has not yet reformed the nation. Gulliver's response is rudely to reject his family and shut himself in the stables with his horses.

Steele, for example, in a spectacularly nauseating number of *The Guardian*, depicts a family circle reading Addison's *Cato* and being thereby 'insensibly won' to the virtues of Cato's family circle.⁴² Steele's essay exemplifies the new domestic virtues of Cato's inheritors, both literally in the play, and literarily, among his readers. In the context of Steele's overbearing focus on sentiment, his phrasing here – 'insensibly won' – deserves comment. To be 'insensibly won' is to be won over without conscious awareness, but also perhaps to be won over without or despite the use of the senses.⁴³ Like Hutcheson's, this is a moral sensibility that connects us directly to the text through the use of a new kind of sense that is not a sense at all, that both bypasses completely and analogises precisely the bodily senses.

Fielding's essays on humour in the *Covent-Garden Journal* make it clear that the self-conscious, critical stance that maintains a distance from the text is also the stance that refuses the conventionalised performances of emotion that enable social bonds. The 'insensibility' of the audience-member reformed in spite of himself is also the ritualized experience of aesthetic immersion and social connection. Peculiarity encourages genius, he says, but also anti-social behaviour. In two back-to-back issues, numbers 55 and 56, published in July 1752, Fielding argues that humour is essentially both anti-social and unchristian. 'In the Deviation from [the golden Rule], ... all that we call Humour principally consists,' he argues. If we read the golden rule correctly, we will be

oblige[d] ... to treat all Mankind with the utmost Civility and Respect, there being nothing which we desire more than to be treated so by them. This will most

⁴² Steele, *The Guardian* 43, Thursday, April 30, 1713, ed. Alexander Chalmers (London, 1806), 251.

⁴³ Freeman, in contrast, argues that Steele's emphasis on the 'personated characters' of the stage maintain our consciousness of mimicry and that it is this consciousness of the fictional status of the characters that makes tragedy morally efficacious (*Character's Theater*, p. 90).

effectually restrain the Indulgence of all those violent and inordinate Desires, which, as we have endeavoured to shew, are the true Seeds of Humour in the Human Mind: the Growth of which Good Breeding will be sure to obstruct; or will at least so over-top and shadow, that they shall not appear. The Ambitious, the Covetous, the Proud, the Vain, the Angry, the Debauchee, the Glutton, are all lost in the Character of the Well-Bred Man. (no. 56, 302)

This is really an argument for social convention as a social glue, and for the practice of politeness as a mask for unrestrained human passion.⁴⁴ For Fielding, humour is a name for incivility, for ‘a foolish Vanity,’ for a failure of ‘complaisance for any other Person’ (no. 56, 303), and in its worst excesses, is the outright brutality of a ‘Tyrant or Conqueror’ (no. 19, 132). Fielding maintains that humour is indeed a national characteristic of the English, and he issues a general critique of English socialisation. There is, he says, a ‘manifest Repugnancy between Humour and good Breeding.’ Good breeding is ‘the Art of conducting yourself by certain common and general Rules, by which Means, if they were universally observed, the whole World would appear (as all Courtiers actually do) to be, in their external behaviour at least, but one and the same Person’ (no. 55, 301).

What can we make of this quid pro quo? Surely the English would not wish to swap their national genius, their capacity to ‘attract ... Merit’ (no. 55, 301), for the less prickly virtues of politeness and good breeding. And yet Fielding is quite serious in his resistance to cruel ridicule and the destruction of reputation, as well as in the equivalence he makes between good breeding and the golden rule, the primary rule of Christian

⁴⁴ See, on Fielding and good breeding, Jenny Davidson, *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness: Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), p. 133.

virtue. As Sennett argues, conventional feeling, feeling and acting by means of established social convention, allows participation in a nationalistic social bond (p. 108).

Genius and peculiarity, in contrast, are remarkable. As Fielding observes of Jonathan Wild, his 1743 satirical representation of Walpole, the ‘Great Man,’ his rhetorical skill set him apart both for his brilliance and for his capacity to wreak havoc on the virtuous and bland Heartfrees of the world. Fielding’s polarisation of humour and good breeding makes sense of his bizarre self-parody in *Eurydice Hiss’d*. His conflation of ‘the Great Mogul’ – Fielding’s theatrical alter-ego – with ‘the Great Man’ – Walpole – argues for their fundamental commonality. What they have in common is the peculiar, destructive, anti-social genius called humour that simultaneously defines English nationhood and destroys the bonds of sociability that make a nation. Humour is the peculiar genius that makes celebrity. It is, in the early Georgian theatre, the circulating images of private persons set apart by their peculiar genius. Political celebrity brings us together to watch the performance of humour, the original spring of comedy, according to the commentators of the age. We view humour on stage in order to ridicule it and cast it out of ourselves as members of a national body. Yet we recognise it nonetheless as constitutive of the English national genius. The feelings we have about political figures are now, in the 1730s, the feelings we have about ourselves. These political figures embody our humours as a nation – they are private citizens made public figures in a new way. They are comedy where politicians were once the stuff of tragedy.